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Roger Cox: 'If watching Aitken and Co doesn't get you excited about winter, nothing will'

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By Roger Cox

The Edinburgh Mountain Film Festival always seems able to attract a smattering of big-name guest speakers, but this year event organiser Stevie Christie is spoiling us like a chocolate-dispensing diplomat.

Topping the bill for 2010, he has lined up celebrity cyclist Mark Beaumont, who will give a talk about his epic bike journey through North and South America; celebrity climber Mick Fowler, who will discuss his adventures on "Snake God Mountain" in the Himalayas; and celebrity adventurer Benedict Allen, star of several BBC TV series, who, for the entertainment of licence payers up and down the land, has allowed himself to be ritually beaten by tribesmen in Papua New Guinea, shot at by drug dealers in the Amazon and blasted with CS gas.

These high-profile personages will no doubt help get bums on seats at the George Square Theatre next weekend, but there are plenty of other, less obvious reasons to get excited about this year's EMFF. The beauty of this festival is the way it mixes up zero-budget amateur productions with slick, professionally produced features, with the former often proving just as gripping as the latter.

Four Seasons has been granted sneak previews of a couple of homegrown ski films that form part of this year's programme and, for anyone with even a passing interest in snow-sliding in the Scottish backcountry, they're absolute must-sees.

The first, Steep Scotland, will be screened on Friday night, which means you get to see it for free if you've bought a ticket for the Benedict Allen talk. Filmed this year by ski instructor Blair Aitken, it shows late season descents of some iconic routes, including Aladdin's Couloir on Cairngorm and Tower Gully on Ben Nevis.

Aitken wowed us a few years ago with his film Cano Bagging, in which he and a couple of mates skied down a series of hairy-looking, Lord of the Rings-style volcanoes in New Zealand. Steep Scotland isn't quite as slickly produced as its predecessor, but it hardly matters: if watching Aitken and Co flowing insouciantly through critical terrain doesn't get you excited about winter, nothing will.

When the Steep Scotland crew took on Tower Gully in May the clouds were down, so they weren't able to ski the top section. A month later, however, when Simon Christy and pals gave it a go, they were greeted with clear skies and soft spring snow.